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AUTHOR Rutherford, William E.
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ABSTRACT

The thesis that classroom instruction in the grammatical forms of a language is undesirable, currently held by a number of applied linguists, is rejected. However, although it has been found that inducement of grammatical consciousness is not necessarily a pedagogical liability, its worth depends to a large extent upon the kinds of facts to be made known and the way in which they are presented. Specific examples of this are presented. While admitting the pedagogical validity of grammar study, it is neither necessary nor desirable to exclude attention to pragmatics; syntax and pragmatics can work in effective harmony. That the student wants to use the language to communicate and that the teacher needs to draw attention to certain structures are not irreconcilable facts. What the student "wants to say" can, in many ways, actually be controlled from outside, i.e., by the teacher, with the aid of proper materials. Such materials would include presupposition-based exercises prescribed not so much by prior stipulation as by the very content of the communication upon which the exercise is built. Specific examples of such exercises are given. (Author)

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Pragmatic Syntax in the Classroom

William E. Rutherford

The thesis that classroom instruction in the grammatical forms of a language is undesirable, held by some applied linguists, is rejected. On the other hand, it is neither necessary nor desirable to exclude attention to pragmatics. Syntax and pragmatics can work in effective harmony. That the student wants to "use" the language to communicate and that the teacher needs to draw attention to certain structures are not irreconcilable facts. What the student "wants to say" can in some ways actually be controlled by the teacher, with the aid of proper materials. Samples of three kinds of such materials are presented.

Few of us can fail to notice the increasing attention which current ESL literature devotes to the matter of communication. The idea of using a language for purposes of sending and receiving real messages would seem on the face of it not to be very outlandish; yet, somehow we need these days constantly to be reminded that communication is after all the name of the game. The swing of the pedagogical pendulum is unmistakably away from emphasis upon the teaching of language *form* and toward emphasis upon the teaching of language *use*.[1] This at least is the thrust of the bulk of current ESL articles that concern classroom techniques and materials preparation.[2] Since textbooks, whose production generally takes years, can

[1] See James (1970) for an interesting discussion of the form/use dilemma in the context of the history of language teaching.

[2] A glance at recent issues of TESOL Quarterly should confirm this. See for example Rivers (1972 and 1973), Schuman (1972), and the papers of Aid (1973) and Dubin (1973). Pages 41-42 of Slager (1973) look in a direction very similar to that being suggested here.

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never quite keep pace with new developments in the field, those in use now by and large reflect our earlier satisfaction that it was sufficient to spend most of our class time in the study of language forms and in their manipulation through controlled exercises. Whatever came out of the student's mouth with no prompting of any kind not only constituted a small percentage of his classroom output but, by virtue of its very spontaneity, could not have had the textbook as its sgarting point. Published classroom materials, therefore, have generally displayed a bias toward the teaching of those aspects of language that are most amenable to structuring. However desirable or undesirable this may be, it is not hard to find other reasons, when you stop to think about it, for such a practice. It is far less difficult to compose a mechanical drill than it is to sketch out a

framework in which some kind of controlled but nevertheless meaningful communication can take place. The easiest of all to invent, perhaps, is the frame sentence in which random lexical substitutions occur in one particular "slot," which is really only one step removed from mere repetition. (I don't wish to raise at this time the question of what purpose such drills serve.) Generally less easy to write than the random mechanical drill is the drill whose items are confined to a single topic. Harder still is the single topic with the added element of meaningfulness. Indeed, the more meaningfulness is built in the more difficult becomes the task. Perhaps it is no wonder then that in the majority of language texts appearing over the last three decades---the heyday of linguistically conceived exercises---it is not the pragmatic utterance but the language token, divorced from any communicational context, that best typifies the content of the drill.

"Drill," moreover, is a very well chosen term. If you look the word up in the dictionary, you find a definition something like "disciplined, repetitious exercise as a means of teaching and perfecting a skill or procedure." And in the case of language teaching, the "skill or procedure" refers of course to the mastery of grammatical forms. Yet it is seldom denied, even among the most ardent supporters of communication-above-all-else, that at various times classroom attention does need to be called to features of language form.[2] The problem, however, is that these two components of language

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[2] One such ardent supporter is Leonard Newmark, in one of whose articles (1966), however, he underscores, by means of an unstated presupposition, the need for attention to language form: "The student's craving for explicit formulization of generalizations can usually be met better by textbooks and grammars that he reads outside class than by discussions in class" (p.82). The italics are mine.

Mastery---that is, the formal and the pragmatic---appear at first glance to be pedagogically irreconcilable. How do you teach language form without at least temporarily postponing actual communication? And when communication does take place, how do you elicit from the student the grammatical construction you've been trying to teach, let alone elicit the correct form and use of that construction? In other words, we want to bring to consciousness, or perhaps subconsciousness, certain features of the language being taught, but at the same time we feel it important to have the student say things that "originate," so to speak, in his own head. Is it possible to do this? Can we actually exercise control over the form that the student uses to express his own thoughts? Certainly not in the most literal sense, but there perhaps are some techniques which allow us at least to move in this direction. I wish to concentrate here upon three such prodedures, which I will refer to as "presupposition," "~~expectation~~ commentary," and "~~identification~~ visual".

Suppose someone were to walk up to you in the lobby of the Caribe Hilton in San Juan and say "Pardon me, where do the buses leave for Miami?" The question is grammatical, and yet there is no piece of information that can serve as a correct answer to it, nor is it even quite appropriate to state, by answering "I don't know," that the place whence the Miami buses depart is not at that moment part of your store of information about the world around you. Rather, you would feel strongly compelled to say something like "But there are no buses to Miami," or "Don't you realize you're in Puerto Rico?" or "What makes you think you can get from here to Miami by Bus?" and so on. In other words, a portion of the original question assumed as fact something which we know is not a fact, namely that San Juan has bus service to Miami. Therefore, the appropriate response to

such a question is not an answer---for there is no answer---but a correction of the false presupposition embodied in the question itself.[3] This sort

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[3] For a tabulation of the various kinds of presupposition that can be seen across the range of English sentences, see Keenan (1971), pp.46-47.

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of correction is what we usually do in such circumstances. Of course, if

the hearer is not positive that the presupposition is false, but only suspects that it might be, his reponse is likely to be a little different. In this case he would probably answer the question about the bus with "I don't know," and then follow with a question of his own, perhaps "Are you sure there's a bus service between San Juan and Miami?" In still another situation the hearer might assume the presupposition is true but express surprise at learning this supposed fact. Again, his first response would likely be "I don't know," this time followed by something like "I didn't realize there were any buses from here to Miami."

The vast majority of information questions, except for the high frequency kind like "What time is it?" "How are you feeling?" "Where do you work?" etc., typically elicit answers displaying syntax of a wide variety and often of great complexity. Given the form and content of a question, the chance of predicting for any speaker what grammatical form the answer will take---beyond that of a declarative sentence---is quite slim. Prediction is considerably more accurate, however, for responses to questions in which the hearer perceives a false presupposition. And it is in such questions that we begin to see possibilities for attempting to exercise control over the grammatical form of utterances which, as far as the person responding is concerned, express original thoughts.

With far less than the usual amount of prodding, I have found it possible to elicit indirectly from foreign students of English constructions of the form John is tall and so is Bill, John isn't tall and neither is Bill,

John is tall but Bill isn't. We can do this by means of an exercise consisting of a series of sentences like the following:

1. I'm thinking of taking a trip but I don't want to go to Europe this time; I think I'll go to Spain and Portugal instead.
   Spain is in Europe, and so is Portugal.
2. What countries border on Spain besides Germany and Belgium?
   Germany doesn't border on Spain, and neither does Belgium.
3. My first stop is Madrid, but I haven't decided whether to go there by boat or by plane.
   The plane goes to Madrid, but the boat doesn't.
4. I'm studying French and Italian now so I'll be able to communicate a little when I get there.
5. I don't like to drive those foreign cars, so I think I'll travel around in a VW or Fiat.
6. At first I thought I'd be back by the 31st of August, but the whole trip has been delayed, so now I'll be coming back on the 31st of September.

Of course, the suggested student responses here do not represent the only thing that it is possible to say. Very natural for number one, for example, would be But Spain and Portugal are in Europe. And in fact the same exercise could be used to prompt responses containing the emphatic form of the verb. In any case, the students would need to have some foreknowledge of the grammatical construction which they clutch at in their eagerness to correct the false presupposition. Imparting this knowledge would constitute at least part of the classroom preparation for such exercises, leading the students to more likely choose a certain suitable construction over a different but equally suitable one.

Also lending itself to this technique would be the teaching of cleft-sentences, such as for example It's not the machines that determine the lab's effectivehess; it's what you feed into them. We could proceed as follows:

1. It was a tremendous idea of Nixon's starting the Peace Corps, don't you think?
   It wasn't Nixon who started the Peace Corps; it was Kennedy.
2. That's right. That was more than a decade ago, just after Saudi Arabia nationalized the Suez Canal.
   It wasn't Saudi Arabia that nationalized the Suez Canal; it was Egypt.
3. Oh, right. Speaking of Egypt, guess how many tourists go ~~to Egypt~~ there every year to see the Taj Mahal.
4. Tell me: don't you think India should be criticized for all that Nuclear tweting?
5. Oh ves, of course. It couldn't be India, with that large Catholic population that they have there.
6. I suppose anyone who calls himself a Hindu hopes to be able to take a trip to Mecca some day.

These two sample exercises are instances of where the grammar construction at issue arises only in the response of the student as a consequence of the particular kind of communication directed at him by the teacher. But we can also structure the presupposition exercise in such a way that the student first hears the focused-upon grammar construction embodied in the teacher's presupposition, in which case the student merely repponds in some way appropriate for the communication but necessarily reproducing the syntax of the presupposition. Thus, for focus on superlatives:

What counties besides India are bigger than the Soviet Union?

But India isn't bigger than the Soviet Union.

Notice that if the original question left out besides India (i.e. What countries are bigger than the Soviet Union?), or in other words did not contain the false presupposition, the natural answer for anyone would probably be None. With the straight question then there is no natural way, at least for sentences like the above, to elicit from the student the grammar feature that we happen at this point to want to hear.

For want of something better, I have used the term "~~expectation~~ commentary" to cover an area of conversational exchange in which the speaker in a way "sets up" the hearer for a ~~retort~~ commentary or retort commonly used in that particular situation. The expected semantic content of the retort usually carries predictable syntactic form, which is what interests us here. For example, in a conversation about, say, a mutual friend, I can set up a chain of events ~~leading~~ leading to a ~~retort~~ commentary of high expectation by saying that last month this friend was driving a Volkswagen and now he's driving a Buick. A very natural response to this for ~~most~~ many speakers would be something like The next thing you know he'll be driving a Rolls Royce. The expression the next thing you know easily follows the setting up of a steady progression of connected events containing a common actor. The accepted verb form to use in that expression is the so called "future continuous." Usually, however, a sequence of three events, two supplied by the first speaker and one by the second, will follow the pattern of a small step between events one and two, a large step between events two and three. Moreover, the pattern does not seem to be bound to our culture alone, as most foreign students instinctively complete the progression the same way. For instance, in continuing to talk about this same mutual friend I might mention that last month he owned ten shares of ITT; now he

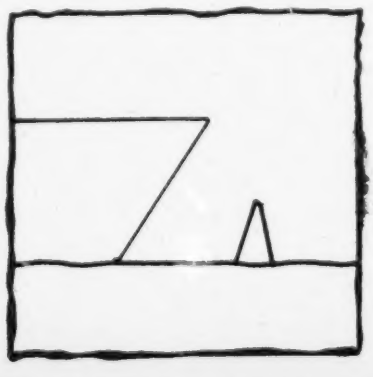
owns fifty shares. Very few students come up with The next thing you know he'll be owning a hundred shares, [illegible] which indeed would sound peculiar. The majority retort is always on the order of The next thing you know he'll be owning the whole corporation. Following is a sample listing of some progressions which have proved to be useful:

1. A few days ago he borrowed a dollar; now he's borrowing five. The next thing you know he'll be borrowing a hundred/a week's salary/etc.
2. Four years ago he ran for student body president; now he's running for city councilman.
3. Yesterday he was complaining about his ~~wife~~ job; today he's complaining about his ~~job~~ wife.
4. Last summer he took a two-week vacation; this summer he's taking a three-week vacation.
5. He always used to eat in French restaurants and go to see French films; now I see he's driving a Peugeot and taking French lessons.

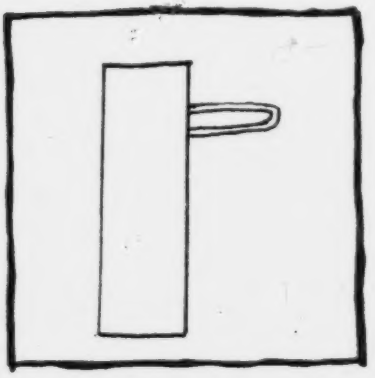
In somewhat similar fashion we can "arrange" it so that the student's most appropriate commentary will contain the conditional perfect, not by any means a very simple verb form. Continuing the adventures of our above friend, if I report to you that a fire destroyed a thousand dollars in cash that he had been keeping under his matress, you would, I trust, come up with something close to He should have put his money in a bank. We can continue the story in this vein and thereby make our friend into a prize ninoompoop, all the while eliciting, hopefully, a bunch of conditional perfects. Thus:

1. The first thing he did when he discovered the fire was to try to call his mother in Chicago.
2. The line was busy, but he had to break open the telephone to get his dime back.
3. Now he has to borrow all the money to repair his house.
4. Here's a telegram for him, but he's on a business trip and we don't know how to reach him.
5. When he comes back he's going to find that his electricity has been cut off.

"Visuals" is the term I have assigned to the third technique, mentioned earlier, for having the student engage in communication that at the same time incorporates a certain desired feature of grammar. Some years ago in many daily papers there regularly appeared a syndicated feature called "Droodles," by a cartoonist named Roger Price. A Droodle is an individual drawing that doesn't make any sense until the person who thought it up identifies it. Although in the syndicated Droodles the author always supplied the titles, the reader could still use his own imagination and make his own guess. In the little booklet of Droodles now on the market this is in fact what the reader is sometimes invited to do. For example, at the very beginning of the booklet appears the Droodle



Price writes that "this, of course, appears to be 'A Mother Pyramid Feeding Its Child,' but it isn't, It is called: A Ship Arriving Too Late To Save A Drowning Witch." From an inspection of all the Droodles in the booklet it is evident that the majority are identifiable with a phrase incorporating a relative clause whose main verb is in the present continuous and whose relative marker + be have been deleted. The title of the above Droodle also carried this syntax, a very common form. The students then can be invited to invent titles to the following, all but ~~one~~ two lifted from Price's booklet:



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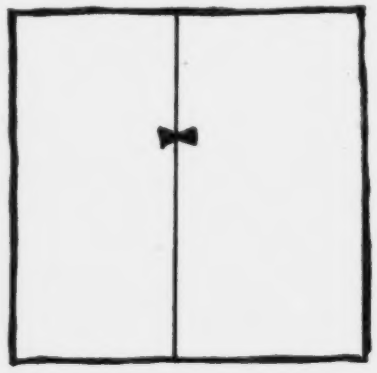

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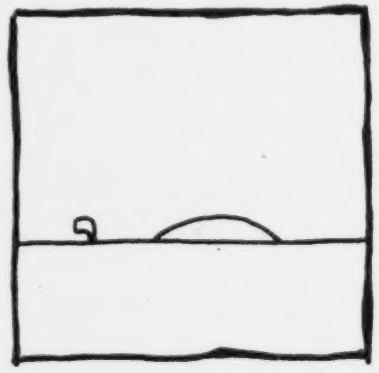

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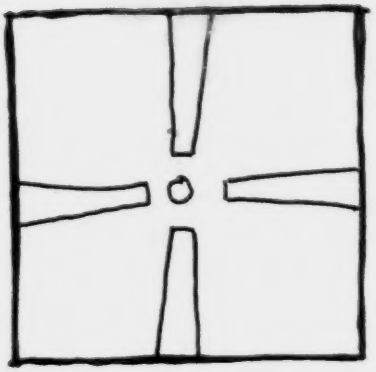

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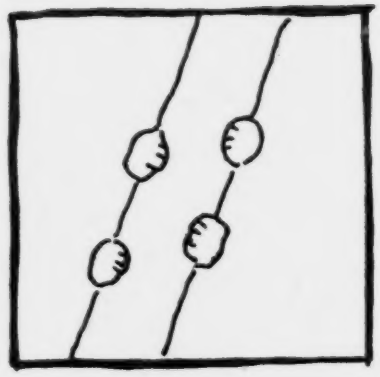

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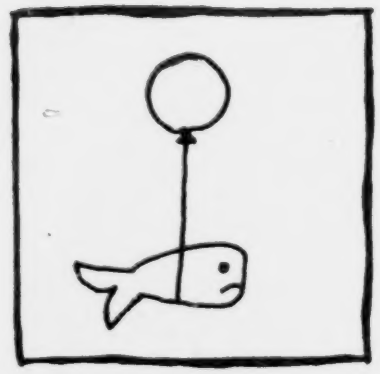

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The intended meanings of the Droodles are as follows: 1. A man playing a trombone in a phone booth, 2. A man wearing a bow tie who stood too close to the front of an elevator, 3. A fat man smoking a pipe in a soft bed, 4. Four elephants inspecting a grapefruit, 5. A bear climbing a tree, 6. A fish committing suicide (which Japanese students for some reason always find screamingly funny).

Droodles are the most successful method I have found for zeroing in on a point of syntax while at the same time letting the students be totally absorbed in the communicative aspects of the exercise. What also contributes to the usefulness of the Droodles is the fact that this particular brand of humor seems to be universally picked up and enjoyed by all nationalities. Unfortunately, Droodle identification brings into play only one small area of syntax, that of reduced relative clauses, and at the moment I know of no other graphic material of comparable enjoyment that can tap other parts of English grammar. Nevertheless, it is a direction in which I intend to keep looking.

The exercises discussed here have been constructed in such a way as to attempt to exert some measure of control---perhaps "prediction" would be a better word---over the form of what comes out of the student's mouth. The ideal practice in syntax would be where we exercise that control without the student's realizing that it is happening. Exercises C and D, in which the student refers to a mythical "he," are farther from this ideal; Droodles are probably nearer to it. In any case, these and other exercises incorporating similar principles, most yet to be devised, can help to point the way toward an amalgamation of classroom syntax and pragmatics.

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